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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE — Radio Service — OFFICE OF INFORMATION

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Housekeepers' Chat

Wednesday, April 9,1930.

Not for publication

Subject:"The Child Who Refuses to Eat." Approved by Bureau of Home Economics, U.S.D.A.

Bulletin available: "Good Food Habits for Children."

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"Whatever shall I do with Johnny?" writes a young mother. "He simply refuses to eat anything that is good for him. I have coaxed and I have bribed and I have shed tears, but all to no avail. Johnny steadily refuses to eat eggs and drink milk. Can you help me, Aunt Sammy?"

I shall try. I'm going to tell you the story of Finicky Florine, the little girl who, like your Johnny, simply refused to eat anything that was "good for her." She wouldn't eat carrots, nor spinach, nor eggs. She wouldn't drink milk.

Many's the time I've heard Forine's mother say to her: "Now, now, dearie, eat your nice oatmeal, and drink your nice milk. And here's a nice poached egg for mother's precious."

But do you think "mother's precious" would eat? Certainly not. She refused the "nice oatmeal," and "nice milk," and the "nice poached egg." The "nicer" the food, the more Florine objected to it. Once, she flew into a regular tantrum, and threw her porridge bowl onto the floor. Then her father spanked her, and Florine held her breath, and almost frightened her mother into hysterics.

The whole family was almost worn to a frazzle, when Florine's grandmother came to visit. Florine's grandmother had infinite patience, and understanding, and ingenuity. She knew that every child feeding problem can be solved, by one method or another. The first time Florine's grandmother saw her refuse to eat, the little girl was allowed to go to bed without any dinner.

"It won't hurt her," said Florine's grandmother. "No healthy child will be starved, or become undernourished, because she is allowed to do without a meal. It may be necessary for Florine to miss more than one meal, before she learns that I am in earnest."

Of course Florine's grandmother knew that "starving" will not always work with a child. Active, healthy little children have every reason to be hungry at mealtime, and as a rule they greet their food with joy. Lack

of appetite may be due to over-fatigue, or to some other bad physical condition, or to not enough active play out of doors. Sometimes the explanation is even simpler -- nibbling between meals. Even the child who does not have ice cream cones, or candy bars, at odd times, may be taking the edge off his appetite by eating wholesome food when his stomach should be resting. Some children may need extra lunch, but if so, the food should be given at a regular time, rather than as a "piece!"

Florine's grandmother found that the neighbors had been giving the child bread and butter, and cookies, and candy, between meals. She put a stop to that. Nor was Florine allowed any more nickels, to drop into the slot of the "Help Yourself" candy store on the corner.

"If parents would only realize," Florine's grandmother told me, "that all of this eating business is so much a matter of habit, they would see to it that only the right habits have a chance to start. By the time the baby is weaned, he should have become acquainted with such a wide variety of fruit, vegetable, and cereal flavors, that adding new ones occasionally would be no trick at all. The trouble is, that mothers often are discouraged, early in the game, when the baby spits out first tastes, and perhaps makes faces. This is a perfectly normal response to the new food, simply because it is new.

"Older children, too, and even adults, often have to become accustomed to something they have not tasted before. It feels strange on the tongue; it may be warmer, colder, or coarser than the accustomed food; it is different, but that does not make it distasteful. Distaste or dislike usually comes under the influence of bad example, or unfavorable suggestion. Often a child is unintentionally encouraged into a dislike by the mother who is prejudiced against the spinach that she is feeding him. Her aversion is strong enough to carry over to the baby, though he is still too young to be aware of what is happening. The slightly older child, proud to be just like daddy, imitates the bad example of his elder, and mimics his father's dislikes.

"Of course, some food prejudices begin in other ways. The food may have been offered when the child was ill, angry, frightened, or otherwise emotionally upset. Perhaps he has unconsciously linked in his mind the flavor of some distasteful medicine with that of the food he is refusing. It is very helpful to trace out these associations of ideas, and experiences, wherever possible, because it is easier for parents to undo a bad habit, when they understand how it began."

Florine's grandmother has made a special study of children's food habits. When she undertook to make Florine over into a model child, she enlisted the help of the child's parents. She asked them to set a good example at the table, and not to talk so much about what they liked, and what they disliked, and to go easy on comments about what foods are "good for children."

She took special pains, too, those first few weeks, to cook meals which would appeal to Florine. The last time I visited her she had a dinner that most any child would like. I have the menu -- wrote it down so I'd be sure to remember it: Corn Custard; Panned Kale; Peanut Sandwiches on Graham Bread; and Apple Sauce and Cookies.

There was a reason for the Corn Custard. You see Florine thought she "just couldn't stand" milk and eggs, but -- when they were disguised, in a Corn Custard, she forgot all about her prejudice against these two foods. Here's the recipe which was used to make Florine's Corn Custard -- five ingredients. for Corn Custard:

2 cups fresh or canned corn, or dried corn soaked and cooked.
2 tablespoons melted butter.
1 1/4 teaspoons salt.
3 eggs, and
2 cups milk.

Let's check the ingredients: (Repeat)

Beat the eggs, and mix all the ingredients. Pour into a buttered baking dish, and place in the oven, in a pan containing boiling water. Bake the corn custard slowly, until it is entirely set to the center, in a moderate oven (350° F). Corn, canned Maine style-- that is, with the grain scored and the pulp scraped out-- is especially good for use in this kind of a dish.

I think there is a recipe for Panned Kale in the Radio Cookbook -- so that is easily dispensed with.

Oh, yes, I must mention the dessert -- the apple sauce and cookies. Sounds quite ordinary, doesn't it? But it wasn't. You see, the apple sauce had a bit of red jelly on top, like the "stop" light for traffic. The cookies were cut in fancy shapes. A common round cookie is only a cookie, but a cookie cut in the shape of a wild rose is something else again.

I wish you could have seen Florine eat her share of this meal. She didn't have to be coaxed at all. In fact, it was easier to manage Florine than it was to manage her parents. As soon as we sat down to the table, her father asked, "Where's Florine's Milk? That child's got to--"

"Hush!" said Florine's grandmother, giving him a warning look. "Can't you talk about the weather, Henry?" And that was the last time Henry mentioned Florine's food. Of course, he couldn't be expected to know that Florine's milk was hidden in the Corn Custard.

To repeat the menu: Corn Custard; Panned Kale; Peanut Sandwiches on Graham Bread; Apple Sauce and Cookies.

Now, if you want more help on the subject of training children to eat, I suggest that you send for a copy of "Good Food Habits for Children" -- a very valuable leaflet for mothers and fathers with obstreperous children.

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